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NBC News
10:00 P.M.

U-2
File

SIDELIGHT TO U-2 TESTIMONY

RICHARD HARKNESS: "And today on Capitol Hill, there was a sidelight to the Francis Gary Powers U-2 testimony. While Powers told his story publicly before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was grilling privately CIA Director John A. McCone. McCone had briefed every other interested Congressional committee on the U-2, except for Foreign Relations, and Senators were miffed.

"This afternoon then, the Committee discussed legislation to tighten Senate and House control of CIA operations. As Chairman Fulbright of Arkansas stated it, the question was how to coordinate the political policies of this country with the activities of the CIA. One possibility discussed was the bill introduced by Senator McCarthy. The Minnesota Democrat would create a special Congressional watchdog committee to oversee CIA. McCone asked for time to study the proposal. This is Richard Harkness, NBC News, Washington."

7:00 P.M.

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Edward P. Morgan, Commentary

Washington, D. C.

A MOST UNUSUAL SPY SAGA

MORGAN: "Probably no history book will ever record the full story of the fateful flight of Captain Francis Gary Powers in his U-2 spy plane over the Soviet Union on May Day, 1960. Moscow won't reveal how his aircraft was downed over Siberia, and Washington won't tell how much it has learned on that and other matters. The Russians won't know exactly how much or how little we really know. Not only that, but perhaps more importantly, there is no way of establishing, except by the unreliable pastime of speculation, what would have happened if Powers had not flown that day. As it was, Khrushchev scuttled the Paris summit conference, high dudgeon after the Eisenhower administration officially admitted the espionage invasion of the USSR, in a bizarre bit of 'I cannot tell a lie' confession, rare and confusing in the annals of international subterfuge and diplomacy.

"The Paris summit might have collapsed in failure anyway, though there are officials who still think the greatest damage caused by the U-2 incident was the cancellation of President Eisenhower's goodwill tour to Russia, in which the administration had placed great stock and elaborate preparations as a device to open further the meager channels of communication between the Soviet people and the West.

"But these points were hardly foremost in the minds of the droves of spectators and journalists who slogged through a slushy Washington snowstorm this afternoon and crammed the Senate caucus room to hear and see spy pilot Powers in person for the first time. They came to hear a science fiction cloak and dagger story of daring misadventure at an altitude of 18,000 feet. But through this was one of the strangest hearings ever held in that large chamber, which had housed such dramas in the past as the Kefauver crime sessions, the Army McCarthy hearings, and the angry set-to's between Teamsters Dave Beck and Jimmy Hoffa on the one hand, and the McClellan racketeering Committee on the other, there was a sag of anticlimax to the whole proceedings.

"In a gentle Georgian drawl, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Richard Russell almost apologized that an open session might appear an unseemly contrast to the Committee's customary forum, but that it was necessary in the national interest, and in the interests of fair play to pilot Powers who had been variously depicted in the past in the press as an adventurer and a poor patriot, who for his country's sake should have been disposed of then and his plane when the moment of truth arrived above Sverdlovsk.

After cry from a swashbuckler himself, the dark-haired young Powers, in a plain dark suit reeled off in a thin, uninteresting voice his ordeals with hardly any more dramatic expression than one would have expected in a traffic accident report. A picture of horror was undeniably there, and the room was hushed to catch every detail. The dull 'whump' of what seemed to be an explosion behind the plane, nudging it ahead. Then a strange pervasive orange glow everywhere, the U-2 spiralling out of control, Powers reaching for the destruction switches, then remembering he would have just 70 seconds to clear the cockpit before the charges would explode, the plane and its secret photographic equipment both, so he thought he had better prepare to escape. Then the pitch of the plane, the rush of air, and the G forces--the pull of gravity--tapped him half in and half out of the cockpit, and he couldn't reach the destruction switches finally. He had apparently forgotten to disconnect his oxygen tube, but he finally wrenched free and was falling until suddenly his parachute opened.

"Then he was down, and in an incredibly short time--in a matter of hours--he was in Moscow, more than 1,000 miles away, facing almost endless questioning, trial, prison, and then--unexpectedly last month--freedom. Most of the committeemen, led by Massachusetts Senator Saltonstall commended Powers as a fine young American citizen who did the best he could under extremely difficult circumstances. An interesting exception was South Carolina's Strom Thurmond, a proponent of strenuous anti-communist indoctrination, who neither praised nor questioned the witness.

"At one point, Powers remarked almost off-handedly, that there was one point I always remembered while I was there, that I'm an American. And as Mississippi Senator Stennis quickly cut in with 'And proud of it,' there was a burst of applause.

"But something was missing. Was it that we moralizing Americans find it hard to associate high purpose with undercover work? Was it that in this wierd world of the cold war, gadgets have robbed secret missions of their glamor? It is hard to say. The most astonishing thing revealed in that crowded caucus room today was the civil, almost courteous treatment Powers received at the hands of the Russians, whose pathological fixation on the sanctity of their frontiers, is also legend. There were no handcuffs, no attempted communist indoctrination. There was instead, preoccupation about his lack of appetite, and even a sightseeing tour of Moscow.

"Senator Russell registered surprise at what he called this gentleness, and surmised that Powers got off better than a Russian spy would have on landing under similar circumstances in this country. Could it be that having had more practice, the Soviets are more sophisticated about this spy business than we are, or must we have a Nathan Hale, who regretted he had but one life to give for his country? There is a grim and uncomfortable fascination about the Powers story, but there is no doubt that we Americans are more at home with the John Glenn type saga. This is Howard W. Morgan, saying goodnight from Washington.